

Young people as visual culture producers. *Similarities and differences between their experiences inside and outside school*

Jóvenes productores de cultura visual: similitudes y diferencias entre sus experiencias dentro y fuera de la escuela

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Artigo completo submetido a 2 de maio e aprovado a 24 de maio 2015.

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Resumen: El artículo presenta un estudio de caso que examina las experiencias aportadas por dos jóvenes sobre sus clases de Educación Artística, contrastándolas con sus experiencias como jóvenes productores de cultura visual fuera del aula. Para ello se identifican los conocimientos que adquieren fuera de clase y que utilizan en sus creaciones, se estudian las relaciones entre estos conocimientos y los adquiridos en clase y se analizan casos que generan contradicciones. El artículo nos anima a preguntarnos qué podemos aprender de sus formas de aprender.

Palabras clave: ensino da arte / educação técnica / educação estética.

Abstract: This article presents a case-study which examines the contributions by two young people with respect to their experiences in Art Education classes, contrasting them with their experiences as visual culture producers outside the class. To do so, it is identified the knowledge they acquire outside school which serves as a base for their creations, it is explored the relationships between this knowledge and school-knowledge, and it is analyzed cases that generate contradictions. The article encourages us to ask what we can learn from their ways of learning.

Keywords: young people / production / visual culture / art education.

Introduction

The research project "Young people as visual culture producers: skills and artistic knowledge in secondary education", funded by The Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (EDU 2009-13712), starts from the idea, shared with other researchers (Charlot: 2001, Birbili: 2005, Hernández: 2007), that secondary education is not taking into account how youth are linked with knowledge in and outside of school. The project analyzes this situation in the context of art education: one of its main aims is to encourage a rapprochement between artistic knowledge as proposed by schools and knowledge that refers to visual culture production which youth in Spain acquire outside school.

In this analysis, the first step was to make a questionnaire, which would give us some evidence of how youth interact with aesthetic and artistic knowledge obtained in and out of the classroom and how this knowledge has an effect on their productions. Eight youth, from different cities in Spain, volunteered to participate in this phase. From the questionnaire we examined the replies on what they do in Visual and Manual Art classes, what sort of lessons they have, what do they think they need in order to improve learning, what interests them in class, whether or not they use their own ideas during the activities they engaged in this subject and what has been the most interesting work which they have carried out, among other questions.

After that, we also interviewed these youth to have a closer look to their reality as producers of visual culture. Two types of interviews were carried out: one in which they commented on and developed replies given in the questionnaire and another episodic interview in which they presented situations as visual culture producers, and put forward events in their life which they consider relevant in this respect.

The work being put forward examines the contributions by two of these youth, Pablo — a 14 year-old boy — and Ana — a 16 year-old girl — with respect to their experiences in Visual and Manual Arts classes in a high school in Granada (Spain). These views are contrasted with their experiences as visual culture producers outside the class. The analysis has been generated by answering specifically the following questions:

1. Which other knowledge which is not acquired purely in the classroom do they rely on for their creations?
2. What teaching value do non-scholastic spaces provide?
3. What impact does the knowledge learned in school have on the building of these young people as producers of visual culture?
4. What can we learn from their ways of learning?

The research has been considered from a phenomenological perspective and a constructionist approach. The paper uses the case study as a research method, and follows the aforementioned questions to organize the structure of the article.

1. The personal and socio-cultural context of youth

Pablo was born and lives in Granada (Spain). He is beginning his fourth year of secondary education. In his questionnaire, Pablo indicated he was interested in painting religious scenes outside of school. Commenting on this answer, he said “sometimes after school when I have finished my homework, what I do to relax is... search for images of Holy Week processions on the Internet, and then I draw them.”

Pablo has grown up in a religious family environment. He ensures this has influenced him, because he has been drawing pictures related to the Holy Week since he was 4 years old (Figure 1).

Ana also lives in Granada, she is in her second year of secondary education in the same school as Pablo. In the questionnaire, Ana said that she was mainly interested in two activities outside of school: drawing in sketch pads and designing T-shirts. She also added that she shares and learns how to do these activities with her mother, who loves cross stitching and handicrafts in general.

The episodic interview was developed in Ana’s house. This helped us to understand that all of these handicrafts are very much a part of Ana’s everyday surroundings: her house is decorated with framed cross stitch pictures made by her mother, as well as other pictures and handicrafts (Figure 2).

2. Which other knowledge which is not acquired purely in the classroom do they rely on for their creations?

The analysis of questionnaires and interviews helped us to detect that when Pablo and Ana talk about their productions they use knowledge that has been acquired outside school. We have classified this knowledge into “religious knowledge”, “knowledge of manual skills and handicrafts” and “knowledge drawn from the media”.

2.1 Religious knowledge

While creating his drawings, Pablo handles specific vocabulary for each invocation of the Virgin and knows aspects that are characteristic of this event such as processions, brotherhoods and sacred images. This vocabulary, which he recognizes to acquire out of school, helps him to make aesthetic decisions in his drawings.

Along with this knowledge, when drawing images he is especially interested in capturing their resemblance and expression so as to transmit what they express. The episodic interview helped us to understand he has embraced the importance of the emotion when looking at images in his religious context, and has linked this to the notion of beauty he tries to translate to his drawings. He also places these images in specific scenarios inspired by moments during the procession which are culturally recognized as beautiful or emotional (Figure 3).

Keeping in mind this kind of knowledge we are able to examine these drawings beyond their status as objects. We can assume that they act like a mirror that reflects how Pablo's taste is outlined out of school, and how his religious knowledge influences his artistic productions.

2.2 Knowledge of manual skills and handicrafts

In the case of Ana, it was found that she has certain knowledge pertaining to the area of arts and handicrafts, mainly involving the techniques and handling of materials and tools specific to these areas.

The analysis of the interviews helped us to understand that these techniques are influencing the construction of her artistic knowledge. For example, Ana knows how to interpret cross stitch guides, and she uses it as a reference that helps her to study the *chiaroscuro* in the images she wants to draw.

She is also fond of miniature objects: she collects small handcrafted key chains and she likes to make her own jewellery. In order to create them, she investigates about materials and techniques using knowledge she finds outside school. That knowledge helps her to decide which is the best material for the aesthetic purpose she is looking for.

In her T-shirt designs, the way materials are handled also plays an important role: she uses glitter markers, puff paint, beads, sequins, etc. Her designs are conditioned by the knowledge of the nature of these materials. Similarly, her fondness of certain materials and techniques marks the aesthetics of her artistic productions (Figure 4).

2.3 Knowledge drawn from the media

In the interviews and questionnaires, Ana and Pablo mentioned the Internet as one of the main sources from which they found knowledge needed for their artistic productions. In this process, not only the "digital knowledge" required to find, sort, understand, analyse and evaluate information using digital technology comes into play, but also the knowledge they extract from their online searches.

While searching online, Pablo and Ana frequently use the Google® image

search service to find photos they want to copy. This service offers references that nurture their creative side, and allows them to get more autonomy and control over their own learning process.

It is also meaningful how they use their mobile phones: Pablo, for example, uses his smartphone to share his pictures in social networks as Facebook® and Tuenti®. He likes people to comment his photos. He also comments creations made by others, and he recognizes these interactions “help him to learn”.

In the case of Ana, her mother is the one who often consults social networks and forums on cross stitching to exchange and download patterns that Ana uses for her artistic productions.

What Ana normally does is to consult web pages related to themes and techniques she finds interesting. As she said: “the references on one web page lead you to another, and you end up finding what you are interested in.” Thus the presence of ICT in these young people’s every day life fosters a logic of use which is reshaping the way youth access information (it is a kind of search in “rhizome”, where a reference leads you to another), influencing their way of owning things and the significance of the knowledge needed for their artistic productions.

Film and television productions are also recognized as sources for acquiring references and knowledge in Ana’s and Pablo’s creations. Interviews were not lacking in references to their favourite films and TV series, where they extract images to be reproduced in their drawings: Ana named fairy series and movies by Disney®, describing their main characters as beautiful and naughty, And Pablo named the film *Titanic*, describing it as a romantic and nostalgic film (Figure 5). As we could analyze, when Ana and Pablo copy these representations, they are not just copying, they are creating a narration. So they are acquiring not only aesthetic or artistic knowledge, but also other kind of knowledge concerning how to look, to understand and to describe the world they are representing.

3. What teaching value do non-scholastic spaces provide?

Through the interviews and responses to the questionnaire it was evidenced that at first, Ana and Pablo did not have a clear awareness of the range of knowledge they rely on for their productions nor the learning process that non-scholastic spaces provide, since they have not systematized this process -at least until it was proposed that they reflect on it more in depth-.

However, there was a case in which Pablo reflected on how certain technological sources helped him to enrich his artistic knowledge, referring to Nintendo game Art Academy®: “It’s a game that teaches you to draw. (...) In the Art Academy you learn how to shade by combining colours”.

He also shows this awareness when he explains that he does "artistic photos", referring to pictures he has taken with his camera and then retouched using the PicMonkey® program (Figure 6 a): "There are different filters that do different things (...). What I do is put the photo in sepia, and then I highlight what I want using the colours I want". On her behalf, Ana recognizes that almost everything she has learned outside of school is related to artistic techniques she has needed, for example to make her key chains (Figure 6 b): "Yes! I really like tiny things...! And this! (Showing an elf key chain and another witch one) I'm looking for the formula, to find out how the heck they make this modelling dough!"

As we can see, Ana and Pablo just mentioned learning processes of artistic techniques in non-school spaces. However, the analysis of the interviews help us to identify other learning values -referring specifically to Internet as a non scholastic space- they also relate to their creative processes. One of them highlights the importance of showing, commenting and sharing their productions online. This enables them to build and exchange knowledge -aesthetic, technical and formal matters- and senses -related to the creation of their subjectivity-. They also have become aware that pictures can be used "as products" online: they feel that they could become "authors", even signing their creations. Internet also offers them important and democratic possibilities, since they can decide what to do -they don't have to do what their parents or teachers decide-.

Anyway, we could say with Haanstra (2010) that learning outside school is made in an "informal way" -without being conscious of it- but implies an "intentional learning"; they choose what to do and how to do it according to their needs and what they consider important.

4. What impact does the knowledge learned in school have on the building of these young people as producers of visual culture?

Our intention was to answer this question based on what they told us about their own creations, observing whether any connections were made in their comments to the things that they acknowledge doing in class.

An analysis of their responses showed that Ana and Pablo valued their school work in the light of technical aspects they had previously stressed when commenting on their own artistic productions. We can see it, for example, in the comments made by Ana about the school's exercises mentioned in Figure 7 and Figure 8, in comparison with her own productions described in the following examples.

The aforementioned situations show that there are links between technical and aesthetic knowledge learned both in and outside of school. In some cases it



Figura 1 · Drawing made by Pablo when he was 4 years old. Photo: own source.

Figura 2 · (a) Framed cross stitch picture made by Ana's mother. (b) Handicrafts made by Ana, decorating the stairs of her house. Photo: own source.

Figura 3 · Drawings made by Pablo. (a) "Our Lady of Charity". (b) "Stations of the Cross" in front of the Alhambra, Granada (Spain). Photo: own source.

can be evidenced that scholastic knowledge nourishes their work as producers of visual culture. This common ground, although not perceptible for Ana and Pablo, tell us something else: they have learnt to appreciate the artistic value of things considering the aesthetic categories fostered in their school (the work should resemble the original, should be well lit, detailed, tuned and nicely finished). This fact leads to several consequences:

- a) Pablo and Ana don't appreciate as artistic those personal creations which don't have these qualities.
- b) They don't acknowledge the importance of other categories such as emotion, moral or affection although they use them to describe their personal creations.

Finally, acknowledging that there is a difference between what they do inside and outside school, they don't want to work on their own productions at school, because these productions do not attend the concept of "art" that is followed there.

5. What can we learn from their ways of learning?

The previous reflections motivate us to reconsider the role of school in the acquisition of artistic knowledge. It is not our intention to have our findings in this research study be considered a portrait of young people -but rather, an observation of what occurs in the case of these young people.

In this regard, and as a conclusion, following are a number of contradictions that we have found examining the similarities and the differences in their process of learning knowledge within and outside the school, which can open areas of analysis and knowledge and could help us to rethink what we can learn from their ways of learning:

- a) Knowledge of art which is present in and, at the same time, unrelated to their lives.

Ana and Pablo recognize a gap between what they do in school and what they are interested in doing. As they said, in Visual and Plastic Arts class, students rarely have the opportunity to draw subject matter of interest to them, rely on the media to find references, or explore handicraft techniques. The proposals used are dictated by the text book, the curriculum or the ideas that occur to the teaching staff. Both are apathetic towards this situation:



Figura 4 · T-shirt made by Ana. Photo: own source.

Figura 5 · (a) Charcoal drawings of fairies, made by Ana. (b) Drawing of Titanic made by Pablo.
Photo: own source.

Figura 6 · (a) Drawing of a chili, made by Pablo following the indications of Art Academy® game. (b) Ana's key chains. Photo: own source.

Ana: In the second year already started to become more independent! (Laughs) I already started to do my own little things! (...) I was looking forward to being taught more unusual things, crafts... and all that, and as I was not taught those things... I said, "Well, I'll do my own things!"

This distancing prevents Ana from relating in a personal way to what she is doing in class and leads to a separation in her imagination between what she considers "hers" and "not hers", that is to say, that which is "school subject matter".



Pablo argues, in a similar view, that his interests were not related to what he was asked to do in class, which led him to make less of an effort in his Plastic Arts class:

Pablo: The highest mark was a 10... I got a 7, 8, or 9... but I've never gotten a 10. Because, besides... (referring to the professor) it was what she wanted to do... And I was not very interested! What I wanted to do was the things I like. And that's why I didn't try very hard.

Considered in this way, the work done in Plastic Arts class is defined as something unrelated to their lives. A space where, as Pablo indicated, you cannot use your ideas, or do the things you would like to do.

- b) Disagreement in the rate of acquisition of the same knowledge. Several stories taken from the interviews reveal that the school is not taking into account that these young people already possess some of the knowledge being focused on. For example, Pablo already understood perspective and had done drawings in which he had used perspective before doing so in class (Figure 9).
- c) Artistic knowledge gained in areas other than Plastic Arts. Both in the case of both Ana and Pablo, situations were also identified in which relationships exist between their personal artistic productions and things they do in academic areas other than Visual and Plastic Arts. For example, Pablo mentioned that he had done some of his drawings of Holy Week in Religion class, and that his primary school Religion teacher had taught him how to shade using lines.

One important thing we learned from this research study is that we had mis-conceived prejudices regarding what we thought the "artistic knowledge learning spaces of young people" were. This study helped us to question our own

School's exercise	Ana's personal production
	
Ana: 'Well, this one because of the colouring... (She refers to the drawing of the sun). I really liked these classes... because they taught me something. They taught you techniques... Here they taught you to combine warmer and colder colours'.	Ana: 'First I painted the top and I used bright blue, but electrical blue, and then on the bottom I used bright pink (...). And I said: "Oh my gosh, that turned out awful!" (Laughter) It didn't look good at all, because the clothing was in pastel shades and in the end... the colour contrast was really strange'.



School's exercise	Ana's personal production
	
Ana: 'Look, I like this one here a lot! Because it was when I really started to shade'.	Ana: 'I like these shades!... but you can hardly see the butterfly, because her hair is also very dark'.



Figura 7 · (a) School's exercise. Drawing of relationships between colours, made by Ana. (b) Ana's production. Picture of a dancer. Photo: own source.

Figura 8 · (a) School's exercise. Drawing made by Ana in the second year of secondary school. (b) Ana's production. Drawing of a fairy. Photo: own source.

Figura 9 · Drawing of the Virgen de la Paz, made by Pablo.

representations of adolescence and to raise our awareness of the importance that contingency and reflexivity have in studies of this type.

This research is showing us the importance of exploring other ways of researching the artistic learning of young people -from the perspective of the knowledge their artistic productions contain and the imagery references to which they are linked-. It shows the need of considering youth as producers of visual culture and not mere consumers. This calls for an important change in mentality: we have to consider them authors and give them a voice -we only give a voice to those we think already have it — (Marcellán et al: 2013).

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